

Letter to Council

To: Congregation Council
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
2515 Waugh Drive
Houston, TX 77006

From: Charlie Dean

Date: December 9, 2012

My Opposition to the Proposed Bylaws

Chapter 11 OFFICERS

Section 2

"The pastor shall be ex-officio member of the Congregational Council and all Congregational Teams and Task Forces."

First, I have reservation about any preacher having an **absolute right to attend the executive session** of the Congregational Council. As Council represents the corporate entity of the corporation, one might reasonably wonder who actually represents the Congregation. Nevertheless, to the extent that Council might represent the Congregation, allowing any pastor the absolute right to attend the executive session has a tendency to diminish the trust and relationship between Council and the Congregation. I want our pastor to be at executive sessions (when appropriate, and most likely all the time), but this ought not be absolute. An absolute right here tends to diminish the responsiveness of Council to the Congregation.

In the best-case scenario, this would make no difference. However, our Bylaws must protect the Congregation in the worse-case scenario. Allowing the above-mentioned change would tend to erode trust, obligation, faith, and confidence, as it should exist between Council and the Congregation. It could increase the temptation of impaired judgment. Overall, it diminishes the present power of the Congregation (Chapter 5 POWERS OF THE CONGREGATION, Section 3). **I hope that we will not delegate away this power.**

Second, I have reservation about any preacher having an **absolute right to attend Congregational Teams and Task Forces**. Teams and task forces might from time to time involve persons with particular skills, interests, backgrounds, educations, and the like that—hopefully—give them a greater likelihood of accomplishing the group's mission. It would be un-helpful for any other church member who lacks requisite skills, interests, backgrounds, or educations, to pop into a meeting and assert himself; it would be just as un-helpful were a preacher to do the same. Overall, it diminishes the present power of the Congregation (Chapter 5 POWERS OF THE CONGREGATION, Section 3). **I hope that we will not delegate away this power.**

Chapter 13 STANDING CONGREGATIONAL TEAMS

It is puzzling whether the Executive Team functions in some manner other than the Staff Support Team. If the Executive Team functions only as the Staff Support Team, then I see no need to give these people two hats to wear. If they do in fact need two hats, I would like to know what function the other hat represents. **I suggest that Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 be deleted.**

Chapter 14 CONGREGATIONAL COORDINATORS

Sections 1-5 appear to be a way to keep several people busy while not making them officers of Council. These so-called "congregational teams" have a strong likelihood of becoming dead-end committees where Council officers can send unwanted matters (or people with unwanted questions, suggestion, etc.). These "congregational teams" are (intentionally I suppose) not called "committees." This concept looks like a problem on the launching pad. Council can always use continuing resolutions as needed. **I suggest that Sections 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 be deleted.**

Chapter 15 ORGANIZATIONS WITHIN THE CONGREGATION

Section 2

The restriction of Special Interest Groups is not reasonable. I suppose two people who want to work on something together compose a special interest group; working together to practice a song, or a Sunday school lesson, or to sweep the floor would be a special interest group. Unless a special interest group is impeding the mission of the church, it ought not need pre-approval from Council. This restriction has the earmarks of discrimination. It would be best to encourage special interest groups (SIGs) within the church, and presume that each is legitimate. In other words, there should be a presumption of legitimacy; anyone who deems a SIG to be an impediment to the mission of the church could bring the concern to Council.

A SIG might be a book club, a self-help website group, bike riding group, a research group, etc. Until a SIG acts in a way that clearly impedes the church's function, it ought to be left alone. **Requiring pre-approval is childish.** It could drive people away from the church to engage in their activities.

There was a time when (as our Bylaws are presently written) church councils could non-authorize or just endlessly-postpone SIGs on their personal whims: SIG (gay dads), SIG (lesbian moms), SIG (teens of divorced parents), SIG (mixed-marriage couples), SIG (gay teens), etc. Council has no legitimate interest in having members of the Congregation feel that they are under the thumb of Council officers. This does not engender enthusiasm for attendance, participation, or stewardship; it has the opposite effect.

As I review the Trend Report (2004 to 2011) of Grace Lutheran Church, it is clear that we had a membership decline. I hope 2012 is better.

Having an assortment of SIGs might attract new members. Some SIGs might be comprised of a member of this church and two other persons who are not members of this church. I am presently a member of a SIG, the Houston Linux Users Group. I have not asked Council for authorization; Council may notify me if I should. **I suggest we delete Section 2.**

Chapter 17 BYLAWS

Section 3.

If leaders of each "congregational team" are going to be "responsible for fulfilling their respective duties relating to the mission of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church," then these people should be Council officers. **I suggest we delete Section 3.**

Chapter 17 BYLAWS

Sections 6-7.

These sections fail to clearly set out the manner and sequence of events for amending the Bylaws. It would be helpful to list in sequence (a, b, c, etc.) each step that must be followed. If there are alternate ways of amending the Bylaws, this should be set out also.

Chapter 18 CONTINUING RESOLUTIONS

Section 3.

I like the concept of a Task Force being active until its assignment has been fulfilled. This means (I suppose) that Council loses the right to terminate the Task Force until such time as the Task Force completes its assignment. I do not know how it is determined whether the assignment has been fulfilled; I assume Council would not make the determination; otherwise Section 3 would be meaningless. I would like to see more detail here.

Digital copy of Bylaws

Although I have been a member of Grace Lutheran for several months, at the time of this writing I have not seen the Bylaws. I have made this known to Council officers; perhaps access to Bylaws is not important at Grace Lutheran. On December 9, 2012 I received a hard copy of the proposed Bylaws. I would liked to have received a digital copy; this could have easily been put on the church Website. I wanted to do searches and could not do that with my hard copy. I have no doubt that an e-copy exists; we do not use typewriters any more.

Our Bylaws should clearly state that the Bylaws, and any proposed Bylaws, be made available on the church Website. Further, the Bylaws should state that the monthly business meeting minutes and related documents be made available on the church Website in a timely fashion.

Sharing of Non-Exempt Material

The Bylaws should require Council to share all non-exempt material in a timely manner. The Bylaws should require that material be shared in digital format if it exists. The Bylaws should require that if it does not exist in digital form, Council ought to be busy resolving this problem.

How to Put Items on the Agenda

I am concerned that Council has failed to adequately and correctly compose and approve minutes to the business meetings. I sent Council two letters, one on October 1, 2012 and another on October 11, 2012. Each time an officer told me the letter would on the agenda and part of the business meeting documents, etc. To this day I see no evidence that this has been accomplished.

There is nothing in the Proposed Bylaws that explain how a member of the Congregation, who is not an officer, can or should arrange for a matter to be placed on the agenda at a business meeting. I consider this of utmost importance. Council should be responsive to the concerns, questions, suggestion, of the Congregation; these should not be relegated to dead-end committees; the ostrich approach is not appropriate. The Bylaws should address this.

Being Responsive

On Wed, Dec 5, 2012 I sent the following in an email to the church; officers received a copy:

Would you please send me e-copies of the following:

1. The last two year's worth of council minutes and treasurer's reports.
2. An itemization of all material over the last two years that has NOT been digitized.
3. An itemization of all material over the last two years that exists in a digitized form.

I have a special interest in the very old material. I have seen some of it in the glass case near the secretary's office. If we do not digitize it (take pictures of it somehow), it will eventually finish rotting before anyone can preserve it. I would like to suggest that we start working on this problem.

I have received no response. The requested material ought to exist and should be easy to send. If it does not exist, someone is incompetent. The proposed Bylaws fail to address this kind of problem.

New Officers Needed to Address Digital Preservation, Organization, and Presentation

We need additional office positions to address the preservation, digitization, organization, and presentation of our non-exempt material and information. Our church has a lot of material going back over a half a century. All this should be organized and easily accessible to the Congregation in a digital form. Members of the Congregation who have Internet access ought to be able to use their home computers to see all this material. This can be done at almost no cost to the church. We need the following officers to head the following committees:

Library Committee:

Among its responsibilities, the Library Committee would be responsible for preserving any and all documents, photographs, and records, whether they are paper or electronic. These records should include but are not restricted to such things as meeting minutes, presentation handouts, brochures, newsletters, photographs and records. This committee would spearhead collection development.

Historian Committee:

Among its responsibilities, the Historian Committee would use whatever tools and techniques and sources are available to understand the past and how Grace Lutheran Church changed over time. This committee would research, explain, analyze, and provide historical background information to Council. It would see that we learn from our past. This committee would keep track of the events going on and record them. This might include taking pictures of events and keeping a digital scrapbook. This committee would ensure that historical materials are handled properly, and that they are properly archived.

Information Technology Committee (the IT Committee)

Among its responsibilities, the IT Committee would recommend information technology policies, procedures and standards. It would serve as an information-sharing forum. It would network with other committees on matters of Information Technology.

Ombudsman:

In spite of council officers being elected by the congregation, there comes a point in the size of the membership (of any organization) where an individual member(s) needs to have an official forum where his individual voice(s) may be presented as an official opinion. This holds more weight than an individual member(s) who acting alone can simply be passed off by Council as whining, annoying, etc. This could lead to innovative ideas getting bogged down in red tape and bureaucracy; there could become a culture of no wrongdoing and common handwashing. This possibility, whether it ever occurs, is sufficient reason to establish the Ombudsman Committee.

After reviewing the proposed Bylaws, it is apparent that Grace Lutheran needs an Ombudsman. The Ombudsman would act as an intermediary, go-between, or agent between congregational members and Council as needed; he would assist members with protocol, organizing, preparing, and drafting as needed. Of course any member would have a right to speak or write to any church officer or Council on his own. The Ombudsman would be **solely obligated to the congregation** and not to the corporate entity or the

church. The officer would approve (or disapprove) the minutes as any other officer. The officer would serve as any other officer of Council, with the exception his fiduciary duty would be to the congregation. **An Ombudsman would help Council be more responsive to the Congregation.**

Summary

Our new Bylaws should promote transparency and accountability. They should in no way have a tendency to lessen the power of the Congregation. I am troubled by what may have been a hasty move to produce proposed new Bylaws.

I appreciate everyone's efforts; clearly someone(s) expended a lot of time and effort. Again, I appreciate your time.

We must (1) read the material, (2) understand the material, and (3) understand the possible consequences and possible applications. I believe the possible consequences and possible applications have not been adequately understood.

References made to:

The 17-page NEW CONSTITUTION for GRACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF HOUSTON, TEXAS 1987

My letter to Council dated October 11, 2012

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B-Q9NcxIFetMeEo0enM1OTBydTA/edit>

My letter to Council dated October 1, 2012

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B-Q9NcxIFetMNMk2MkpZNGpEaDQ/edit>

Trend Report (2004 to 2011) of Grace Lutheran Church

<http://archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/RE/Trendnet/cdsTrendNet.asp?Id=E5C0AFD096A29DB9EA92B7D3AF8FCBAD8DA7DD9EEC97A5A5BEA9D6A59DB9BEB3E279AADDDB1BA9C8D>